The Woman Behind the Number: The Irrelevance of the Age of Aisha (ra)

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Author Biography

Nuriddeen Knight is the author of *40 Hadith of Aisha*. She completed an MA in psychology with a focus on child and family from Columbia University. Alongside her academic degree, she studied traditional Islamic knowledge including Islamic law, theology, spirituality, and prophetic biography with local scholars and in the *majalis* in Amman, Jordan.

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Viewing ‘Aisha’s age at marriage through a Western lens

Why would the Prophet ﷺ marry a child? That is the question many want answered, but before we begin to address it, we have to admit it is more than a mere question; rather, it is an accusation and judgment of character. Underneath the question lies the notion that we should be troubled by the age of ‘Aisha at marriage, that whatever her age was, it is concerning, and—worse than that—however great the Prophet ﷺ was, the age at which ‘Aisha was married to him is problematic.

I released my book, *40 Hadith of ‘Aisha*, in May, 2018. It’s a collection of 40 *hadith* in English narrated by ‘Aisha, the wife of Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him. In that book, I thought it important to give readers an introduction to Lady ‘Aisha, her life with the Messenger of God ﷺ, and her scholarship. But what I did not think was important to include in that brief biography were details of the current-day controversy surrounding her age at marriage.

This was a discussion I’d heard many times and I had no wish to engage in it in my book. Not because the discussion isn’t important—it is—but because in a brief introduction to ‘Aisha, May God be pleased with her, it didn’t seem that it should be prioritized. The most important fact of ‘Aisha’s life is not that she married young. Her level of scholarship, her love for the Messenger ﷺ, and her love for the religion of Islam are the most important aspects of her life. What pains me most about the conversation around ‘Aisha’s age is not that it exists but that it is given so much weight, time, and attention. To focus on her age at marriage is to dim the light of her great contributions, contributions that made the transmission of this beautiful *deen* possible.

While our Mother, Lady ‘Aisha, may have been as young as 9 years old when she married the Messenger of God ﷺ, the controversy surrounding her age is a manufactured one. During the lifetime of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon

him, his enemies would search for any way possible to harm and defame him. They called him crazy, spread false rumors about his wife committing adultery, and tried to kill him on multiple occasions. They took advantage of any opportunity to physically harm him or expose a potential flaw. So one would have to ask: if the age of ‘Aisha was truly controversial, why didn’t his contemporary enemies use it against him?

The controversy over the age of ‘Aisha is, in fact, a quite recent phenomenon. It is quite simply an attempt to defame the Prophet ﷺ—as those of old attempted to do—by questioning his judgment and ethics in marrying ‘Aisha at as young as 9. But this attempt at defamation, like all others, falls flat.

What is a child? Understanding our notions of childhood

I was blessed to study traditional Islam on weekends, during school breaks, and for about two years after finishing my Master’s degree. Academically, however, I studied psychology with a focus on child and family. For this reason, I will utilize this section of my essay to discuss ‘Aisha’s age through a psycho-social lens. My Master’s thesis consisted of an analysis of the construct of childhood, the parent-child relationship, and the way in which our concept of childhood has changed over time. My primary conclusion was that childhood is a construct largely created by society.

To understand the way in which childhood is a creation of society, we would do well to first reflect on the ways in which adulthood is a creation. At what age does one become an adult? 18? 21? 30? At one age you can vote, at another you can join the army, at another, you can legally get married. And these ages vary from state to state. They vary from culture to culture. And they vary by time period.

Beyond deciding the demarcation between childhood and adulthood, we also make decisions about what are appropriate behaviors for an adult to engage in and what are appropriate for a child to engage in. The difference between children and adults from a psycho-social point of view is not merely in physicality or mental

alertness—even adults vary in these ways—rather, it is through differential treatment and expectations.

Children, in our context—at least in the not-so-distant past—were a group of people in society who were shielded from the adult world. It was considered more indecent to curse in front of a child than in front of an adult, speaking about sex before a child was deemed particularly disgraceful. The very essence of the concept of childhood involves protection or shielding. Children are deemed innocent and protecting their innocence is one of the primary jobs of adult society. Children are not innocent simply because they are smaller than adults, they are innocent because their knowledge is limited and adults need to protect them from the adult world.[1]

The information contained in written language is only accessible to those who can read that language. Therefore, compulsory education not only creates but extends childhood. In many developing nations, the key to ending 'child-marriage' is education. The more schools are built, the more school attendance is normalized, and fewer adult expectations will be placed on children.[2] This isn't only true of marriage but for adult responsibility in general; child labor is no longer a part of the fabric of American society because our expectations for childhood changed—as our society became more literate, we decided that a child's time should be spent in school instead of working.[3]

Though childhood is partly biological—no one would argue as to whether a 2-year-old is a child or not—societal expectations also affect how long childhood lasts. Around the world people who modern civilization deems children are not considered in this way by their own societies. "Children" work, get married, and have children just like their adult counterparts. Postman argues in his book, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, that the concept of childhood is largely a byproduct of the way in which information is disseminated throughout a society. To elucidate this idea, he points to the illiterate European middle ages in which the concept of

[1] Overexposed, Under-connected by Nuriddeen Knight (Unpublished).
[2] *The Disappearance of Childhood* by Neil Postman (1994).
[3] Educating Girls, Ending Child Marriage, http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2017/08/22/educating-girls-ending-child-marriage

childhood was largely absent, "That is why there had been no need for the idea of childhood, for everyone shared the same information environment and therefore lived in the same social and intellectual world."[4]

What is the appropriate age to get married?

For the age of 'Aisha at marriage to be controversial, there must be an uncontroversial appropriate age of marriage in our society. For us to judge whether or not someone's age at marriage is controversial we must have a clear moral framework by which to judge, but we don't. In the United States, legal age for marriage without parental consent or judicial permission is 18 in all states. But the age at which one can marry with parental consent is as young as 14 in Alaska. Other states—like California, Colorado, and Idaho—have no age limit at all; as long as the couple receives the consent of parents or a judge, they could theoretically marry at any age.[5]

Of course, culture plays a role in when people get married outside of legality. But even within a given culture, people disagree on what is the best age to get married. Some argue marriage is best when one is mature and has already accomplished a significant portion of their career and education goals. Others argue it's better to marry young and support the spouse's growth.

The actual age at which people marry also varies from state to state. In my hometown, the city of New York, people marry for the first time on average at around 29 for women and 30 for men; in Alaska, the average age at first marriage is 25 for women and 28 for men. There's also a difference in age at first marriage for the current generation vs. our grandparents' generation. In 1960, 60% of adults were married by the ages of 20-24; only 14% of adults of the same age range are married today. By the age of 35-39, 93% of all adults were married in 1960 in 2010 77% of adults in that age range are married—16% less than our grandparents.[6]

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[4] Postman, p. 36.
[5] Average Age of Marriage By State, https://www.dailydot.com/irl/average-age-marriage-by-state/
[6] Barely Half of US Adults Are Married: A Record Low, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/14/barely-half-of-u-s-adults-are-married-a-record-low/#age-at-first-marriage

Since age at first marriage and age at first sexual experience do not coincide in our society, it is also valuable to look at the average age of first sexual experience. The age at first sexual experience is often a few years prior to the age at first marriage. In a study of 72,137 students, ages 17 and younger, about 50% of students reported not yet having sex, a little over 25% reported having their first sexual experience between 13-15 years old and a little over 10% reported having their first sexual experience between 11-13.[7]

What is considered the appropriate age for marriage (and first sexual experience) varies greatly in our society. The legal age of marriage, the average age of first marriage, and the age of first sexual experience all vary between the age of 11-early 30's. When it comes to the age one should or can get married or engage in sexual intercourse we (in Western society) don't have a clear moral foundation to judge by. And we don't have one clear opinion on the matter nor even one clear law legislating the age of marriage. Our opinions and laws vary from state to state, and time to time.

This being the case, how can we possibly judge the age of 'Aisha at marriage as good, morally sound, acceptable or not? And how can we as Muslims allow a society with such varied opinions on this matter judge our Prophet's marriage when they can barely judge for themselves?

It's also worth noting that while the Prophet's marriage comes under scrutiny by Western critics, he could legally have married Lady 'Aisha—having the full support of her family—right here in America (recall that in many states there is no age limit for marriage; only parental and/or judicial support is needed).

[7] Age of Sexual Debut Among US Adolescents, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3064497/

Understanding ‘Aisha’s context: She was already engaged

It’s important to mention that scholars have various opinions on the age of ‘Aisha. Aisha herself says in a *hadith* that she was 6 when she got married and 9 when she moved into the home of the Prophet ﷺ. We also know through *hadith* that when she moved into the house of the Prophet ﷺ, she was past the age of puberty. While we trust ‘Aisha’s word on many matters, her self-reported age comes into question for several reasons. One of those reasons is the fact that at this time, as in several cultures, many did not calculate their age or know their exact birthday. Other issues that make scholars question Aisha’s self-reported age are beyond the scope of this paper. But, because of that information, some scholars calculate that she was closer to 15 or even 19.

But maybe the most interesting fact to note is that before ‘Aisha, may Allah be pleased with her, married the Messenger of God ﷺ, she was already engaged:

> *Aisha had already… been promised to Mutim’s son, and her father had to negotiate with Mutim in order to break the engagement. ‘Aisha then officially became Muhammad’s second wife, though the union would not be consummated for several years.*[8]

This allows us to make one, or possibly two, conclusions. The first is that when ‘Aisha married the Prophet ﷺ, she was mature enough to marry in general. The second is that the age at which ‘Aisha married the Prophet ﷺ was considered culturally appropriate. If the Prophet ﷺ had not married ‘Aisha, she would have been married to someone else within a similar time frame.

There are two other ways in which we come to understand that ‘Aisha’s age at marriage was not unusual—if not universally, at least at that time in that culture. And this comes by way of two women: Khawla and Zaynab.

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[8] *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* by Tariq Ramadan (2007).

We know ‘Aisha was seen by the Prophet ﷺ in a dream as his future wife:

> *I was shown you in a dream for three nights. I dreamt that an angel carried you on a piece of silk and said: Here is your wife, and when I removed [the cloth] from your face, I saw you. I said: If this is from Allah He will carry it out.*

In a similar narration, she says the angel Jibril (Gabriel), came to the Prophet ﷺ with her image on a green silk cloth and said:

> *This is your wife in this world, and in the Hereafter*.[9]

But there was also a worldly dimension to their union. The Prophet ﷺ suffered a great deal from the loss of his wife Khadija, may Allah be pleased with her. Khawlah, a companion of the Prophet ﷺ and an early Muslim saw the effect of this painful loss on the Prophet ﷺ and grew concerned about the depth of his despair. Knowing how immense the loss of Khadija was to his life, she wanted him to remarry to fill the void of her passing. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ allowed Khawlah to act on his behalf and approach the women she thought would be suitable for him—Sawdah and Aisha. While it’s not the point of this essay, it’s also valuable to note that polygamy—which is controversial in contemporary Western society—was clearly a part of the social norms at the time:

> *She went first to Sawdah who accepted the news with joy, then to her father who also responded positively and went to his daughter to confirm her acceptance, “It is a noble match. Do you want me to marry you to him?” He stated and she agreed. They married and she moved into the Prophet’s household immediately.*
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> *Sawdah was a middle-aged woman and a widow with children. She was also an early convert to Islam who had made the first migration with her husband to Ethiopia. Having had children of her own and previously married she easily filled the mothering void in the Prophet’s household, assisting him in raising his four daughters. Sawdah was described as a “tall and large*

[9] Bukhari 3606.

> *black-skinned woman, with a jolly, kindly disposition…Khawlah then went to the family of 'Aisha to make the same proposal.*[10]

Clearly, Khawlah thought the match was appropriate and the Prophet ﷺ also showed no concern about her age. But his lack of concern about her age is not because he simply "didn't care what people thought" nor because he felt he was so powerful that he could marry anyone without exception. The Prophet ﷺ was not concerned about her age because it was not a concerning factor in their time.

The case of the Prophet's marriage to Zaynab, may Allah be pleased with her, clearly shows that there were some kinds of marriage that were deemed unacceptable at the time. His marriage to 'Aisha was not controversial; his marriage to Zaynab was. In the culture of the time, when a man adopted a son he was given the rights of, and treated like, a son. God's Messenger ﷺ had an adopted son named Zayd who he raised and married to a woman named Zaynab. For numerous reasons—class issues, among others—the marriage didn't work out and they divorced. God then commanded His Messenger to marry Zaynab; this made the Prophet incredibly uneasy because he considered Zayd to be his son. But God wanted to forever remove this cultural norm from society. While Allah, Glory be to Him, praises the care of orphans, the rulings surrounding blood relations and all other kinds of relationships must be clearly differentiated. Once the Prophet ﷺ married Zaynab, the defamation of his character began anew—how could the Prophet marry his son's wife?, his enemies lamented. Yet no one had much to say when he married 'Aisha—why not? It seems clear, that while marrying the ex-wife of your adopted son was controversial at the time, marrying 'Aisha—whatever her exact age was—was not.[11]

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[10] *40 Hadith of Our Mother 'Aisha* by Nuriddeen Knight (2018).

[11] Detailed discussion about the verse "But you did hide in yourself (i.e., what Allaah has already made known to you that He will give her to you in marriage) that which Allaah will make manifest" [al-Ahzaab 33:37], https://islamqa.info/en/96464

Is there a universally accepted age of marriage?

It may seem that I'm making a morally relative proposition concerning the age of marriage, but that is not the case. What is an adult? What is a child? As we've already discussed, history and culture deeply shape our views of both. But when we look beyond arbitrary numbers attempting to dictate the exact age of childhood and the exact age of adulthood, we see that there has in fact been—at least historically—an accepted developmental transition between childhood and adulthood. In most societies and in most time periods, childhood ended, and adulthood began, at puberty.

Puberty, whether it begins at the age of 9 or 15, is a marker of (young) adulthood. Even in America, we distinguish between children and "pre-teens/teenagers," which often coincides with puberty. Puberty is the best universal marker of adulthood because it considers what all humans share, our biology. Puberty takes place when our bodies can begin to reproduce children, a heavy responsibility. The body's capacity to have children holds immense significance for all human beings, and that reality is the universal marker of a distinct transition away from childhood and into adulthood.

"While a new report from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that teen pregnancy rates are on the decline in 15-17-year-olds, there are still 1,700 births a week."[12] The most common solution given to this "problem" is to put young girls on birth control pills. In other societies—with essentially the same motivation (avoiding the "shame" on the girl and/or her family of out-of-wedlock children)—parents marry their daughters young. In one society, puberty is the time to talk about marriage; in another, it's a time to talk about birth control, but both societies recognize the immense significance of puberty as a turning point in a girl's life.

The universally acceptable age of marriage is 'post-pubescent.' For one society that may be 13, for another it may be 25, but the commonality and near-universality is nevertheless a 'post-pubescent' age. And whatever the exact

[12] http://www.healthywomen.org/content/article/top-3-birth-control-options-your-teenage-daughter

age of ‘Aisha, the age at which her marriage was consummated was after the age of puberty.

We must also consider that the cultural and legal age of marriage is affected by the value a culture places on reproduction. While ‘Aisha, may Allah be pleased with her, never bore any children of the Messenger of God, younger women, in general, have a better chance of having many children whereas older women are at increased risk of infertility. Women are born with all their eggs and lose them over time until they hit menopause, whereas men continue to produce new sperm even at advanced ages. The younger a woman gets married the more likely she is to have several children.

This is not much of an issue in a society that doesn’t see value in having large families. A significant percentage of Americans believe having two children is ideal. “In 1976, 36% of women in their early 40s had given birth to four or more children, while just 22% gave birth to two children, according to a new Pew Research Center report. But according to 2014 data, it’s more common nowadays for women of the same age to have two children: 35% gave birth to two children, while just 12% had four or more.”[13] With this being this case, we may find no cultural imperative to marry young, but that is not universal. Many traditional cultures see immense value in having many children and this serves as yet another reason they take no issue with women marrying young.

Youthful marriages and domestic violence

One of the fears surrounding child marriage is that the wife in that situation will be abused and mistreated by her husband because of her immaturity. There was the case of Nujood back in 2008, a young woman given in marriage to a horribly abusive man:

[13] Americans’ Ideal Family Size is Smaller Than it Used to be, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/08/ideal-size-of-the-american-family/

> *Nujood was married off to Faez Ali Thamer, a courier in his 30s, …her father, Ali Mohammed Ahdal… was… broke with 16 hungry children at home… one of Nujood's sisters had… been raped and another was kidnapped… Faez promised the family not to touch Nujood until she reached puberty. But the promise was quickly broken as Nujood spent each night struggling, and failing, to escape his predatory advances... He gave her three dresses, two hairbrushes, perfume and two hijabs as wedding gifts, and also a US $20 wedding ring… Faez took back the wedding ring immediately after the wedding party and sold it to buy himself new clothes. She was also constantly abused by her in-laws, who told him to hit her even harder every time he beat her…*[14]

In response to the fervor by many Muslims to end 'child marriages' because of this case with Nujood and many others, I wrote back in 2016 on my Facebook page:

> *So we are left as believers with a serious issue. We cannot despise "child marriages" because, by many accounts, 'Aisha was a child when she married the prophet, peace to him. So what are we to make of cases like Nujood's? I see Nujood as a brave hero and I greatly admire her but I don't hate her parents for marrying her off nor do I see the primary issue in her case that she was young. If we changed Nujood's age to 18 at the time of marriage is it of any better quality? Is she any happier? And would she not simply be 18 and divorced? If you put the same story forth and change the age to any number at all it is still a terrifying story that any woman would be horrified to be in. This man was a liar, an abuser and an oppressor.*[15]

In our time, child marriages often occur in societies in which domestic violence, misogyny, and poverty are also common and thus women are suffering no matter their age at marriage. It is possible that it's best for a place like Yemen to raise their age of marriage to 18 after seeing the abuse suffered by young women in their society, but that doesn't make so-called child-marriage, when that child is

[14] Divorced At Ten Years Old, https://www.aquila-style.com/focus-points/mightymuslimah/against-all-odds/1266/
[15] Poverty Not Abandonment, Abuse Not Age, https://www.facebook.com/notes/nuriddeen-knight/poverty-not-abandonment-abuse-not-age/1472597646385389/

post-pubescent, evil in itself. And if we're worried about domestic violence we can rest assured that the Prophet ﷺ never raised a hand to 'Aisha and hated domestic violence in general, saying, "How does anyone of you beat his wife as he beats the stallion camel and then embrace her in the night?"[16]

Letting the discourse die

What was the age of 'Aisha at marriage? Simply put, old enough. Marrying near the onset of puberty is not possible or preferable for most of us in our Western cultural context, and that's ok. We are not obliged to marry young or to get our daughters married young. We can hold our own cultural and individual opinions about the age one ought to get married, but we must stop pretending that this is a moral position—it's one based on circumstances.

The goal of my paper is not to support or encourage marrying young, nor to say that we in the West are wrong for doing what we deem necessary to protect the most vulnerable. But, if our opinions vary within the same time and culture, is it fair that we pass judgment on a 1400-year-old society with their own set of norms and expectations?

Portraying 'Aisha (ra) as a child is meant to portray the Prophet ﷺ in a certain light. A light that attempts to fit 'Aisha (ra) into a larger narrative of Muslim women as "meek, submissive, and oppressed," and Muslim men as "oppressive, abusive, and unjust." A narrative that is both malicious and dishonest. The controversy around her age prevents us from discussing her legacy and contribution to Islam, her life and marriage to the Prophet ﷺ, her knowledge, and her wisdom. 'Aisha is so much more than the "child-bride" the enemies of our beloved Prophet, peace be upon him, attempt to paint her as. She was a saint, a sage, and a scholar—can we please make that legacy the bulk of our discourse around this amazing woman?

[16] https://sunnah.com/urn/56720